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This issue, alas, sees the end of *Free-Fall Warriors*. But if you'd like to see more of our intrepid and decidedly different fighters, let us know by writing to *Captain Britain Communications*. On the subject of our letters page, we've none this month as we're overflowing with stories. But somehow we doubt you'll hold it against us. Your views and opinions will be given an airing when the Communications page returns next issue.

And speaking of next issue, we've TWO new stories beginning... A new text story entitled *City* by Mike Collins, with illustrations by Mike himself and Mark Farmer, replaces *Paragon of Paintorpe Street* which concludes this issue. And *Space Thieves* is our all-new, light hearted galactic thriller, written by Dave Harper, drawn by Barry Kitson, and inked by Jeff Anderson, whose *Paragon* pics have graced our first few issues.

But enough of *C.B. 5*, you've still 36 pages of this issue to devour!

Editor: Ian Rimmer • Assistant Editor: Simon Furman • Design: John Tomlinson • Production: Alison Gill and Jez Meteyard • Advertising: Sally Benson (01 221 1232)



Captain BRITAIN contents



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ITCHY SKIN,
INFLAMED AND
PEELING.

MOULDERING
SCABS, DECAYING,
DRIBBLING.

THAT WAS HOW
IT STARTED.

THEN BOUGHETS
OF ANGRY BOILS
SWELLED TENDER,
RED AND RIPE.

AND BILIOUS
SLIME, DIMLY
RANDED, CUDGLED
IN SALINDICED
WOUNDS.

RIVERS OF PUTRID
PHLEGM CASCADED
FROM SCARLET
SORES AS FRACTURED
BONE RUPTURED
ROTting FLESH.

CRIMSON
AGONY SOAKED
INTO TATTERED
CLOTHING, SULLIED
BODY AND SOILED
GARMENT TWISTED
AND MERGED...
A SWIRLING MOSAIC
OF FUSED FLESH
AND FABRIC.

THAT WAS HOW
IT CONTINUED.

Captain BRITAIN

SIDNEY CRUMB
IS ILL.

"I DON'T FEEL GOOD.
AIN'T DONE FOR WEEKS."

"I NEED 'ELP. SOMETHING
MEDICINAL. GET ME
BACK ON ME FEET.
BE OKAY THEN."

MIKE COLLINS
ALAN DAVIS
CO-CREATORS
ANNIE HALFRACREE
LETTERER
IAN RIMMER
EDITOR

SIDS STORY

THROUGH A HAZE OF PAIN
AND ALCOHOL, HE NOTICES
MOVEMENT IN THE RAIN.

"LOOK AT THEM KIDS—
BLIGHTERS OUGHTER
BE AT SCHOOL."

"AIN'T NO DISCIPLINE...
ALL OF 'EM, TOO CHEEKY..."

TIME ALTERS. MEMORIES
AND REALITY BLEED
INTO EACH OTHER...

CHEEK ME
WOULD YOU?

THIS'LL TEACH
YER YIE LITTLE
BEGGAR!

MEMORIES OF WANTON
VIOLENCE FROM A
DRUNKEN FATHER...

"Mebbe them kids can
'elp, if'n they ain't
sniffers, that is..."

"UHH—MURTS JUST
TO STAND UP..."

AY! KY, STEVE!
IM OVER THESE,
LOOK AT 'IM!

WO'7 JUST A
GRUBBY TRAMP,
INNIT? FORGET 'IM—
JUST BE CADSIN'
FER MONEY!

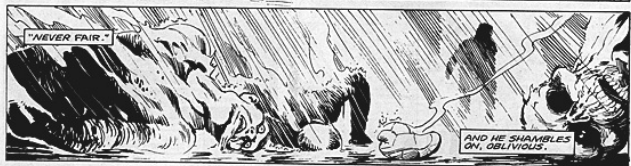
IT AIN'T A
TRAMP, NICE--

-IT
AIN'T!!!

AND FOR SID, TIME
ALTERS AGAIN...

...AIN'T YOUR
LUCKY DAY,
CRUMBIE?!

NAH, NOT
MEETIN' US,
IT AIN'T!







BLOODY
HELL!

"TROUBLE, ALWAYS
TROUBLE... EVEN
MAVIS..."

TIME ALTERS ONCE
MORE. IT'S THE
LAST DAY OF A
DRINK-WRECKED
MARRIAGE...



I'VE HAD ENOUGH!
I CAN'T STAND ANOTHER
DAY IN THIS Hovel.
WATCHING YOU DRINK
YOURSELF INTO THE
GROUND!

SEE YOU
AT YOUR
FUNERAL,
SID.

THE VAGUE INTRUSION
CREEPS IN EVEN MORE,
BUT PASSES WITH THE
VISION...



"DAMN YOU,
MAVIS!"

"YOU COULD
HAVE STAYED!"



"MY JOB HAD GONE —
YOU SHOULDN'T'VE TOO..."



"YOU TOOK ALL
MY RESPECT
WITH YOU, MAVIS!"

"I'M ILL, MAVIS,
I DON'T NEED
THE HASSLE..."



"I NEED
MEDICINE."

WE CAN'T
CONTROL THE
SITUATION! GET THE
BLOODY ARMY IN!

SHE IS
ROMA.

SHE IS
ANXIOUS.

SHE INHERITED THE
REINS OF THE MULTI-
VERSE WHEN MERLIN,
HER FATHER, DIED, A
COMPLEX KNOWLEDGE
FOR AN IMMORTAL SO
YOUNG.

NOW JUST ONE
EXISTENCE HOLDS
HER OVERSEEING
EYE, AN EXISTENCE
THAT IS THE CAUSE
OF HER ANXIETY.



"I WATCHED THE ROGUE
STUDYING HIM AND
PLOTING. DID NOT
WANT TO MEDIATE. THAT
WAS MY FATHER'S WAY."



"THE ONSLAUGHT
BEGAN AND STILL
I ONLY WATCHED."



I LEFT IT TO HIS
SISTER'S FLEDGLING
POWER TO SHIELD
HIM FROM DEATH. I
DID NOT STRETCH
OUT MY HAND.



CAN HE SURVIVE
IT? HE HAS BORNE
MUCH MORE THAN
HIS SHARE.



EVERY
INSTINCT
IS TO HELP
HIM...

BUT NO—I WILL
NOT DO AS MY FATHER,
AND INTERVENE. THE
CAPTAIN MUST STRUGGLE
ALONE.



"I KNOW HIM...IT'S THAT BIG PONDGE! THE ONE WHO THINKS HE'S AN 'ERO! HE'LL HELP ME - HE'S GOT TOO!"

AND TIME ALTERS. REALITY SHIFTS AND BLEEDS ONE FINAL TIME TO THE RUBBISH TID WHERE HIS LAST FRIEND HAS VANISHED...

MRS. MGEARY? WAS THAT YOU SAYING 'SHIZIK' JUST THEN?

MRS. MGEARY?

AIN'T YOUR LUCKY DAY!

LITTLE BEGGAR!

SEE YOU AT YOUR FUNERAL, SID!

THE FACES OF THE PAST SHIFT AND GEL, AND THE ANIMALY RETURNS, NO LONGER AT THE EDGE OF HIS VISION...

... BUT AT ITS CENTRE.

IT IS THE FURY. IT IS THE SUPREME KILLING MACHINE. IT HAS CROSSED THE PARALLEL REALITIES TO HUNT ITS PREY, CAPTAIN BRITAIN.

BUT IT HAS PAID HEAVILY FOR ITS VIOLATION OF REALITIES. STUNTED AND DAMAGED BY ITS FLIGHT, IT NEEDS MATTER TO REBUILD ITSELF...

WITH MRS. MGEARY, IT WAS DEADLY ACCURATE.

SUCH GOOD FORTUNE COULD NEVER BE SID'S...

WITH THE WOUND COMES INFECTION.

THE FURY'S POWER OF MUTATION HAS BECOME SIDNEY CRUMB'S CURSE.

"THAT THING DID IT! I CAN'T BE CURED!"





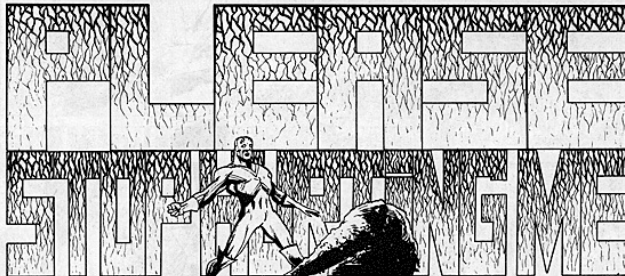
I CAN'T LET
IT GET AWAY. I'VE
GOT TO DESTROY IT—
BEFORE IT BECOMES
MORE POWERFUL...



"STOP IT!
STOP IT!"



"PLEASE STOP
HURTING ME!"



IT SCREAMED!
IT SCREAMED! I
HEARD—NO, FELT IT...
IT ISN'T MALEVOLENT.
IT'S IN PAIN...





NOT LEGION.
KAPTAIN ... NOT ME.
THAT'S ANOTHER
BROTHER.

FASCINATION....? WHY....?
LEGION....? WHY....?
WHAT DOES THE SPECIAL
EXECUTIVE WANT
WITH ME NOW..?

... AND FASCINATION?
SHE'S OUR FRIEND NOW...
THERE IS NO SPECIAL
EXECUTIVE...
NOT YET...

WAR DOG WON'T
EVEN BE WHEELED
FOR ANOTHER HUNDRED
YEARS. AND COBWEB IS
ELSEWHERE. WE ARE
A FAR MORE SENIOR
ELITE...



... GATECRASHER'S
TECHNET.

KAPTAIN
BRITON, YOU HAVE
THE HONOUR TO BE
OUR PRISONER.

Next: Double Game

Abslom Daak DALEK KILLER

Script: Steve Moore

Art: Steve Dillon

THE 26th CENTURY EARTHMAN ABSLOM DAAK, CONVICTED MURDERER, HAS BEEN EXILED TO THE PLANET MARSABA, RECENTLY CONQUERED BY THE DALEK EMPIRE, WITH NO HOPE OF RETURN, HIS ONLY TASK: TO KILL AS MANY DALEKS AS HE CAN... BEFORE THEY KILL HIM.

INTRUDER ALERT!
ATTACK! ATTACK!
ATTACK!

RUN, WOMAN!
THERE'S NO GOING
BACK NOW!

BUT THEY'RE
COMING IN
AFTER US!

AND NOW, ACCOMPANIED BY PRINCESS TRYIN, EX-DALEK OF THE 26th, HE HAS FOUGHT HIS WAY TO THE VERY ENTRY-PORT OF THE DALEK BARGE-SHIP...

NOT FOR
LONG-T

BUT WHERE DO
WE RUN TO?

BUT MAYBE
THAT ISN'T SUCH
A BAD IDEA...

SNAP!

UNIT DISARMED!
NEED ASSISTANCE!

TO OUR DEATHS,
I EXPECT... I DON'T HAVE
TIME TO STOP AND ASK
FOR DIRECTIONS...

OKAY, CUDDLES... TAKE A LOOK
AT THOSE CHAINSAWED... NOTICE
THOSE NICE WHIRLING TEETH...

... AND IMAGINE THEM
RIPPING THROUGH YOUR
LITTLE TIN BODY!

NOW, YOU'RE GOING TO LEAD
US TO THE COMMAND-
DALEK, AREN'T
YOU...?!

I WILL OBEY!

I'M
BEGINNING TO
LIKE YOU
A-READY,
CUDDLES!

YET AS THEY MOVE DEEPER INTO THE HEART OF THE WAGT SHIP...

LOOK! AN ESCAPE-CAPEULE! WE COULD STILL GET OUT OF HERE!

YOU TAKE IT THEN, LADY! I'VE STILL GOT SOME BUSINESS TO FINISH!

NO, I'LL WAIT FOR YOU... I'VE GOT YOUR BLASTER...

CHANCES OF MY GETTING BACK HERE ARE A BIT LESS THAN ZERO! WHY DON'T YOU GO IF YOU WANT TO LIVE?

BECAUSE I... I'M NOT LEAVING WITHOUT YOU, ABSLOM DWAK!

DUMB ABOOD! LISTEN, CUDDLES... NEVER GET INVOLVED WITH WOMEN!

DO NOT UNDERSTAND!

NO... DON'T SUPPOSE YOU WOULD...

AND, IN THE NEXT CORRIDOR...

THE COMMAND-CELL IS AHEAD!

YOU WILL NOT EXTERMINATE ME?

ME DO A THING LIKE THAT? NO...!

CAN'T SAY THE SAME ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS, THOUGH!

SO LONG, CUDDLES...

SKAP! V!

INTRUDER! INTRUDER!

COMMANDER! INTRUDER APPROACHING!

DANGER! DANGER!

BA BOOOOM!

DOOR CLOSED!

TEK!

STAND GUARD! INTRUDER MUST NOT ENTER!

BUT...

RRR! P!







The Mysterious NIGHT-RAVEN

Script: Steve Parkhouse

Art: David Lloyd

NIGHT TIME IN THE CITY...NIGHT RAVEN LIES AMIDST THE WRECKAGE OF THE EXPLOSION CAUSED BY A MURDEROUS PROTECTION RACKET...THE POLICE BELIEVE HIM TO BE RESPONSIBLE...



YOU'VE GOT THIS ALL WRONG, OFFICER...

SHUT UP AND GET ON YOUR FEET. YOU'RE IN THIS UP TO YOUR NECK, MISTER!



WAIT 'TIL I GET THESE CUFFS ON YA... THEN WE'LL FIND OUT WHAT KINDA NUT'S HIDIN' BEHIND THAT MASK!



THIS IS COMPLETELY UNNECESSARY, OFFICER... I'M NO CRIMINAL!

TELL IT TO THE POLICE CHIEF...



BLAST! CAN'T SEEM TO GET THESE CUFFS... UHH... THAT'S IT!

CLIK!



WELL, IF YOU WON'T BE NEEDING ME ANY MORE, I'LL SAY GOOD-NIGHT...



HEY... WHAT THE... HOW? WAIT A MINUTE... I DON'T...



HOLD IT! I'LL BLAST YOU...

I DOUBT IT...



YOU SEE, I TOOK THE PRECAUTION OF REMOVING THE BULLETS!

CLIK! CLIK! CLIK!



THE NEXT NIGHT, IN THE SHOP OF OLD ALBERT FELDSTEIN, CLOCKMAKER...

TY YI... WHERE VILL IT ALL END? VIOLENCE, DEATH... POOR CARLO GONE... AND THIS AIN'T THE LAST I'LL BEY...

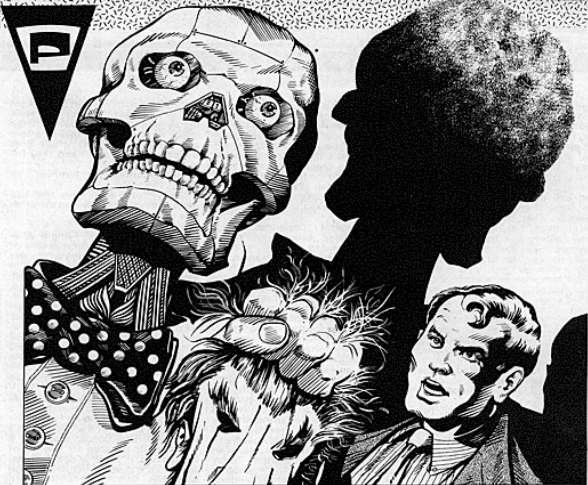


WHO'S THIS NOW AT THE BACK DOOR?

TAP! TAP!







Episode 4 **Paragon** **of Painthorpe Street**

by Steve Alan Illustrations by Jeff Anderson

*"I am but a shape that stands here,
a pulseless mould,
A pale past picture, screening
ashes gone cold."*

Thomas Hardy

Desperate to be his favourite superhero, Paragon, but trapped in a pudgy, ageing, extremely un-superheroic body, Jonah Pringle lives in a ghastly limbo of frustration. Then he meets Fox Maitland, enigmatic owner of a singularly unusual fitness centre. Maitland offers him the chance of an entirely new body; one that Pringle knows only too well...

PARAGON 428: THE DAY IT RAINED DORBOLAK. Flying the solvent remains of his arch-nemesis, Dex Dorbolak to his antipodean retreat, Paragon was forced to abandon his mission when

Kora Kane fell out of a passing aircraft. The fishtank and its baleful contents drifted into the eye of a bizarre radioactive storm, peppering the western hemisphere with billions of evil droplets. The droplets re-constituted as billions of evil replicas of Dorbolak, who proceeded to adv-

ance on Capitol City. The earth trembled, the horizon turned black, and the heavens shook to the sound of nasal Hungarian laughter as the multitudinous malefactors closed in...

Fox Maitland rolled up the copy of *Paragon* 428 and propelled it with great force into the corner of his laboratory, wearing an expression not unlike that of a man who has discovered that the tasty, savoury snack he has begun absent-mindedly to eat is, in fact, a centipede. He turned his attention instead to the transfer bunks, where he had recently transplanted the living soul of Redmond Jonah Pringle into the synthetic, parahuman form of a Genesoid; a robot, which bore a purely intentional resemblance to the superhero presently

occupying the corner of his laboratory. Paragon slept, as he had for several hours, stirring fitfully, smacking his lips, and occasionally (as he was now) sucking his thumb.

And dreamt, as the life of a small, sad man paraded before him in a grey kaleidoscope of years. Pringle relived his life with a vague horror, a profound and desperate wish that he were somewhere else. Preferably somewhere that he would not be called balloon boy, as he had at school. Balloon boy. He had spoken the words aloud, but the voice was that of a stranger. It had been deeper, stronger than his own... As realisation hit him like an electric shock (which indeed it was) Pringle's eyes snapped open. Crisp, pink fingertips dabbed fluid from fresh, pliant cheeks, as the body swung eagerly to a sitting position. Pringle marvelled at the ease with which he had moved, unencumbered by wasted muscles and sagging flesh. The very atmosphere of the room seemed to crackle and coruscate as he laughed, loud and long and deep. Then - "Bloody 'ell, I'm freezing!"

"Temporary. I do assure you." Fox Maitland stepped into view, wearing the smile of a vacuum cleaner salesman and holding a mirror. He flicked it expertly about Pringle's shoulders as though absorbed in his own, very private joke, and again Pringle laughed out loud as he caught sight of his Paragon face. Maitland widened his smile, an astounding enough phenomenon in itself. "Teething troubles," he said ambiguously. "Now you're conscious, the Genesoid's nervous system will gradually assimilate to the norm dictated by your subconscious. Basically, you'll get warm." Almost on cue, Pringle felt heat spring from the pads of his fingertips as he kneaded the taut new flesh of his face. He cleared his throat and discovered the reflex unnecessary, as nothing remotely resembling phlegm obstructed the synthetic larynx.

"You needn't be afraid of me. I won't harm you." Rich, west coast American. "Oh gosh, that's good." Broadest Yorkshire. "Mere words cannot express the infamy of your deeds, you fiend!" Childish chuckling. "It's ruddy marvellous!"

Maitland smiled patiently. "I'm sure. But maybe you'd like to test your strength and co-ordination? Hate to think I hadn't tuned you up properly..." Nodding furiously, Pringle rose fluidly to his feet and paced the room. He was a panther, a titan, the personification of power. "Eee, I feel like doing ten thousand press-ups."

"Time consuming, but quite possible. Unnecessary as well, of course." Pringle raised his arms above his

head, clenching and unclenching the mighty fists. "I'm Paragon! Paragon! Forty-eight wasted years, and they're all worth it just for this here, now, Paragon!!! He realised that the was using the more than adequate larynx to its fullest capabilities, and something coloured the handsome cheeks.

"Truly the Man of Iron," said Maitland, with what was becoming a near-permanent smirk.

Several passengers sniggered openly as Pringle boarded the bus, and he felt his face flush again. He was too handsome, he realised. Men such as Paragon simply did not exist in the real world, where mundanity was the norm, perfection a myth. He felt like a god caught hawking daffodils. Then he remembered the spectacles he had bought for the occasion of his new identity: Calvin Elroy, Paragon's alter-ego. He fished them out of his pocket and put them on. Now at least he had a redeeming flaw.

Pringle had not visited the Coal-mouth Department of Health and Social Security since his resignation, or more specifically, since the day he had expressed his heartfelt wishes that his ex-superior contract dysentery, thus ending his career as a civil servant. Today's excursion, however, was of an altogether different nature. Today was a mission for Paragon. He entered the canteen. It was 11.35 am, and she was there.

He walked towards her. He walked towards her. He seemed to have been walking for hours before Joan Riley turned, looking up into his ludicrously handsome face with wide brown eyes. "Good morning, Joan," said Pringle, as something lurched and juddered and felt exactly the same inside his chest.

"Oh, it's you," said Joan Riley, furrowing her brow in mock anguish for a moment. "Calvin... Elroy, is it?"

"Yes," said Pringle, momentarily flustered that she should forget something of such obvious colossal import to her.

"Thanks for the roses," she smiled wryly.

"Glad you liked them," said Pringle, exposing his flawless teeth in a terrifying grin.

"I was very flattered," she said, beginning to turn away. Pringle panicked. "I don't suppose you'd feel like going to the pictures or anything..." he blurted.

Oh no. He had forgotten the American accent. Had she noticed? He was making a quite spectacular imbecile of himself.

"Well," said Joan Riley at length, "It's very nice of you, but I've already been going out with someone for ten

months. I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea..." Pringle's smile remained bolted to his face but the image in his mind was that of a Tom and Jerry cartoon, in which lines crazed across his teeth and they fell out, piece by piece.

"But... ten months? But I've... all this..." I thought..."

"Sorry?" said Joan Riley. She had been waving at someone on the other side of the room.

Where is he? Pringle slammed the enormous side of complex circuitry which was his hand on the surface of Veronica Lake's desk. She flinched, startled and not a little frightened, and in addition to his immediate grievances Pringle now felt like a thoroughgoing cad. "Sorry," he gruffed. He spanned the distance to the lift in two dynamic strides, prodding the call button into its bracket with an acrid sizzle of roasting electronics. "He can't be disturbed..." Veronica Lake shrilled after him, but Pringle had gone.

Fox Maitland's face was flushed as Pringle hurtled melodramatically into his laboratory, tripping over the turned-up carpet at the door. But his voice was mellifluous, soothing, a mid-Atlantic panacea for the ills of humankind. "How 'y'doin' there, Jonah? Or is that Calvin?" he grinned roughly.

"Didn't damn well work, did it?" said Pringle bitterly. Maitland watched him for a moment, then shook his head slowly with a patronising smile. "You've got a lot to learn, buddy boy. Okay, so maybe she didn't fancy you - it happens, for crying out loud. Can't you deal with that?"

"It never occurred to me. Never even crossed my mind," Pringle mumbled.

"Look," said Maitland gently. "If it helps any, I happen to know that Miss Lake is kind of sweet on..."

He broke off. Pringle had crossed the room and yanked a coverlet from one of the transfer bunks. A small, plump, grey skinned figure lay there still, its chest stirring lightly, its rotund face almost cherubic in what was not quite death. "I thought I recognised the socks," said Pringle, with terrible gravity. "I never thought to ask what you did with the bodies..."

"He'll go to a good home," Maitland's flat voice was non-committal.

"Oh?"

"Me."

Pause.

"You're a Genesoid as well, aren't you? I should have realised..."

"Congratulations, you win the gold key to the crapper." Pringle studied the strange expression on Fox Mait-

land's imperfect, emphatically human face. He saw sadness, doubt, and something else. He felt afraid again.

"I don't get it. All this perfection you've created — and it's not enough?" Paragon's words were those of a very old and bewildered Yorkshireman.

"Well, you know how the song goes, Jonah. After you've been eating steak for a while, beans taste just fine."

"I don't believe it!" said Pringle. "Look at that thing! It's even more bloody 'orrible than I remember it..." There was an awkward silence, eventually broken by Maitland. "I may have killed you."

"Come again?"

"I said I may have killed you!" Maitland was shouting, the same unfathomable, macabre look raging behind his eyes. Pringle did his utmost to appear very thoughtful before he eventually said "Look, I'll admit there's probably quite a lot I don't understand about all this, but you really mustn't upset yourself on my account..."

"Your account! You drooling simple!"

"Now just a minute..." But Maitland was already at the door. "Come with me." It was not a request.

At the far end of the gleaming corridor was another door, unsurprisingly identical to the previous twelve. Maitland glanced significantly at Pringle, but the suddenly oafish Paragon face was a study in mute incomprehension. Maitland turned a key and ushered him in, not gently.

The stench of rot hit both men like a stone wall. Synapses clacked in Pringle's synthetic head as his Genesoid body sealed off the intolerable fetor.

A thing lay on the bed. Something odd. Something soft. Something the most horrible colour Pringle had ever seen in his entire life. Hideously wasted limbs sprouted at sickening angles from the creature. Wires protruded from it everywhere, and tubes steadily drained brown ichor from the ruined, slobbering mouth. Eyes bugged, sightlessly yellow from their rancid, liquifying sockets and Pringle discovered that his Genesoid stomach could turn over with all the violence of the original model. "It's still alive," he heard himself say. Maitland simply stared at him, and Pringle found his eyes returning, unresisting, to the suppurating human detritus on the couch. Ulcers clung eagerly to every inch of mouldering flesh, and there were patches of what looked like mildew. There was very little hair left on the decomposing scalp, but what there was — wasn't it red hair? Sandy perhaps? And the riven face, wasn't it



just a little like...

He swung again to face Maitland, who had removed the skin and hair from his own pseudo-human cybernetic head. Minus their fleshly covering, thirty two immaculate teeth gnashed horribly as he spoke. "Yes, Mister Calvin goddam Elroy. Me!"

The door closed again on its obscene secret as the two entities squared off in the still corridor, but Maitland's mechanical skull with its huge manic orbs and rictus smile was unreadable. "Oh, good grief!" said Pringle.

"Sorry," said Maitland. He restored the mask but as the intricate musculature of his face reconnected, its expression was grave.

"I should have died fourteen years ago. Melanoma. Turned malignant and infested my body with its filth, turning me into that pile of garbage in there. But by then I'd already developed the transference matrix — and I survived! For seven-and-a-half years

the living mind of Fox Maitland endured — in his own machinery! I was a sentient laboratory, calculating, creating, desperately pursuing the one thing I came to prize above all others. Life! I knew my body would never be cured, but I couldn't just let it die.

"The Genesoid was my ace in the hole. It sustained my private fortune, built me a whole new empire. Hell, it even got me back on two legs again. But like you said — ain't enough. I'm gonna be human again, the time is right, and you're the lucky guy."

"What was all that stuff about killing me, then?" said Pringle. If understanding had dawned on him at some point throughout Maitland's bewildering oration, there was no external sign on Paragon's odiously handsome features.

"Who can say?" said Maitland. "I mean, I'm not God. What if I haven't transferred the human soul at all, only recorded it? Copied it. What if I'm dead, and this thing talking to you

now is only some kind of crazy electronic phantom? That would make me just about the most literally inhuman mass-murderer this planet has ever known, wouldn't it?"

Waves of horror washed mercilessly over Jonah Pringle. "Don't you even know? Don't you care? This... These people..."

"I know that there are fifty-seven Fox Maitlands alive in the world today," said Maitland with deliberate relish, as though anticipating applause. "Fifty-seven Fox Maitland Fitness Centres, liberally scattered throughout the globe. You didn't think I became a multi-millionaire by busting my buns in a jerkwater town like Coalmouth, did you? Ask yourself: can a man really exist in fifty-seven separate places, and still call himself one man?"

Pringle blinked. "Or am I a recording?" Maitland added in a sing-song voice, pinching his nose. "Ask yourself that one on the way out - I've got work to do."

Pringle staggered unseeingly down at Paragon's suddenly alien, terrible hands. "This isn't just wrong," he said softly. "It's... evil." But Maitland was now leaning against the wall, his fingers in his ears, humming: *The Star Spangled Banner*.

Insane, thought Pringle, as he stepped into the lift. Foaming, bedbug, wicker basket gaga. He would go to the police, of course. He was a hero now. He was Paragon. Perhaps he had always been Paragon; a Gladiator, a Paladin, a Man of Tomorrow. He had simply needed a foe, a diseased maniac to awaken his mighty warrior's soul. Alive, dead, it hardly mattered. Redmond, Jonah Pringle had never truly existed until this moment. So engrossed in this particular reverie was Pringle, that he entirely failed to notice the lift indicators. He had not been travelling upwards, but down.

The doors opened into darkness with a soft hiss of rushing air, the rancid, stagnant frowst of the tomb. Startled, Pringle stepped gingerly into the sepulchral gloom of Maitland's basement. It was pitch black. He felt his face grimace in the tenebrous silence. The smell. Powerful, pungent disinfectant of some sort; bleach, and pine, and - something else. Something eerily familiar which lightly strummed the synthetic hairs at the nape of his neck. He took two more cautious steps, and it was then that he heard the very slight, sibilant sound, high, high above his head. Lord, but the place must be the size of an aircraft hangar. He looked up, as cool liquid dappled his face. Sprinklers. The disinfectant was coming from the

ceiling in a steady, fine rain. Pringle submerged in his pockets, where he knew he had a matchbook. He found it. Now he would discover just exactly what was going on.

He didn't scream. He didn't dare. The merest vibration might have brought them down on him, damp and reeking and empty, so empty for his company. Pringle tore most of his fingernails to shreds as he scabbled and clawed at the now firmly sealed lift doors, his own voice whispering abjectly in his head. Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease.

He wrenched them open with a shrieking of buckled metal and torn conduits. The lift was gone. He hurled himself into the empty shaft, arms flailing wildly. There would be cables. He knew there would.

Jonah Pringle climbed the lift shaft towards a rectangle of light, some thirty feet above him. Its subtle luminescence revealed his ruined fingertips, and Pringle remembered at last where he had smelt that eerie, horribly familiar taint before. Upstairs. He had never thought to ask what Maitland did with the bodies.

The rectangle of light proved to be from the floor he had left only minutes previously: the floor which housed Maitland's laboratory. All was silent, but for the omnipresent electrical throbbing. The light hurt his eyes.

"Maitland!" Pringle was roaring. Silence. "I really am going to give you a tremendous nosebleed, you bloody little maniac," he continued. "Maitland!"

There was a faint rustling behind him, and Pringle swung, bleeding, sledgehammer fists at the ready. He was fully prepared for absolutely anything. Absolutely anything but the squish which met his eyes.

The squat, smiling and vaguely foreign looking man who stood before him wore the expression of one who has recognised a dear and cherished old friend. He wore a skintight apple green leotard, an apple green cloak, and a high, rakishly pointed, apple green collar. Three things about the man were not apple green. These were the squarish wrap-around spectacles he wore, which were white. There was also the large white 'D' which adorned the front of his leotard. The third thing about the squat, smiling, vaguely foreign looking man which was not apple green was the aerosol can in his right hand. It was yellow, and sported the legend 'Pedasol' in cheerful crimson letters. Pringle stood, utterly transfixed, as the man depressed the nozzle of the aerosol, enveloping him in a cloud of billowing white vapour. He was dead before he hit the deep pile, coffee-

with-cream carpet.

The man approached Pringle's lifeless body and knelt, cackling in what sounded remarkably like a nasal Hungarian accent. "And so to bed," he said, cackling again. "And so to bed." Then he became perfectly still, his eyes frosted over, and there was nothing in them. Nothing at all.

In a corner of his darkened laboratory, his face lit only by the lambent blue phosphorescence of myriad panels, Fox Maitland began to laugh. He laughed silently at first, softly, his shoulders gently shaking. Then he tossed his head back and began to guffaw, louder, ever higher in pitch, until the sound surpassed the capabilities of a human larynx. His mouth began to tear. It tore wider, cutting deep, raw channels in his face and then his neck as rivulets of red, then blue, then yellow fluid bubbled thickly out, mingling with his tears. Fox Maitland laughed until his face was a ragged, seeping caricature, and his laughter an obscene fifty-seven piece orchestra which girdled the world.

A gentle rain had begun to spatter the pavements of Coalmouth as the chubby, balding man stepped out of the door of the Fox Maitland Fitness Centre. He was an oldish man, well into middle-age, and from a distance the waxy hue of his skin blended almost seamlessly with the drab grey clothes he wore. He walked slowly, for he was not an athletic man, and would have been in no way remarkable but for the near ecstatic smile spread across his pasty, non-descript face.

Then a strange thing happened. A girl passed him. She was just small enough to be shorter than he, and she walked quickly and purposefully, straight brown hair dancing about her shoulders. The man stopped, momentarily puzzled. It seemed almost that he knew her, although there had been no flicker of recognition in the girl's brown eyes as she passed, nor even acknowledgement.

The man shrugged, and resumed his walk. The rain was falling quite heavily now, and a chill autumn wind blew sweet wrappers and a dismembered newspaper past the lone pedestrian. Smiling again, he raised his decidedly ordinary head, his chins jutting at the sky.

"Beans taste just fine," he said. His voice had a mild, lilting quality. But those who noticed only looked embarrassed.

The End

DAWN, ABOVE THE SURFACE OF
WARWORLD, ALL WAS CALM.
THERE HAD BEEN A BRIEF LULL
IN THE ETERNAL BATTLE.

TIME FOR TIRED TROOPS TO REST,
TEND THEIR WOUNDS...COUNT
THEIR DEAD.

BUT NOW, *BENEATH* THE SURFACE...
A HURRICANE WAS ABOUT TO ERUPT.



FREEFALL WARRIORS
MISSION: IMPROBABLE!

SCRIPT: PARKHOUSE PENCILS: PARIS INKS: LEACH LETTERS: STARKINGS EDITOR: RIMMER

STAY IN BEHIND ME!
STAY TUCKED IN AND
KEEP NEAT! WHEN
WE HIT THAT SPACE-
STATION WE HIT IT
TOGETHER OR
NOT AT ALL!

DO YOU
READ ME?

I SAID DO YOU
READ ME?
CAT! THIS AIN'T
A SAC, DAMMIT!
GET BACK IN LINE!

COOL BREEZE!
YOU'RE BREAKIN'
FORM... WHAT THE
HELL'S GOIN' ON
HERE??

AM I TALKIN'
TO MYSELF?!
HAVE YOU GUYS
GOT YOUR
COMMUNICATORS
SWITCHED ON?

CAN ANYBODY
HEAR ME OUT
THERE?

WE CAN HEAR
YOU BABY... WE JUST
AIN'T LISTENIN',
THAT'S ALL!

IF THAT'S THE
WAY YOU WANNA
PLAY IT...
IT'S EVERY MAN
FOR HIMSELF!

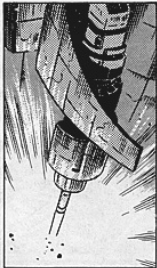
HIGH ABOVE THE
NORTHERN ICE-CAP,
COOL BREEZE WAS
ALREADY CARVING
OUT HIS OWN PIECE
OF THE ACTION...



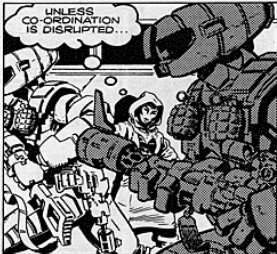
BLAZING LIKE A
BEACON IN THE
POLAR NIGHT...

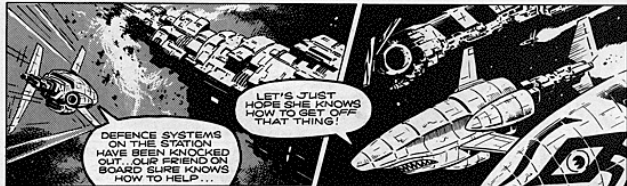


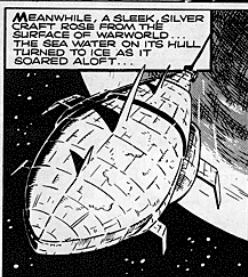
AND DIVING LIKE
AN ARROW FROM
HELL ON TO HIS
ALLOTTED TARGET!



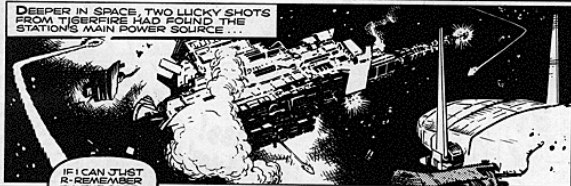
HEY! THE
DROID IS CARVING
UP THE STATION!
LET'S GET IN THERE
WHILE THERE'S
STILL SOMETHING
LEFT!



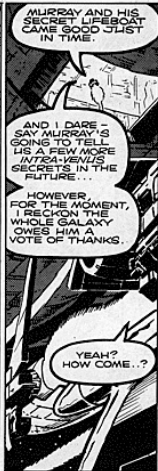




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